

Unions seek more green involvement

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With workplaces responsible for a large proportion of carbon emissions, unions are calling for a network of environment reps with full legal rights.

The main topic under discussion for this June's World Environment Day will inevitably be the long-term impact of global warming and what can be done to bring carbon emissions under control. With data now showing that workplace emissions are one of the principal sources of carbon emissions, the union campaign to have environment reps champion greener workplaces is growing in strength.

A recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a scientific body of the United Nations (UN), found that temperatures in 11 of the last 12 years were among the 12 warmest years since 1850. Consensus is forming among scientists that these increases are mainly the result of human activity generating greenhouse gases. If greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise at the current rate, scientists predict that temperatures might go up by more than 6°C by 2100.

Now that the environment debate has moved into the mainstream, governments and employers are finally waking up to the threat. In March this year the government published its draft Climate Change Bill, aimed at "moving the UK to a low-carbon economy". The Bill included targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions in the UK by 60% by 2050 and by 26-32% by 2020. The government said the reductions would be achieved by market mechanisms such as green taxes, carbon trading and new technologies.

Although broadly welcoming these initiatives, many union activists and environmental campaigners are sceptical about whether these measures will be sufficient to get employers to change their behaviour.

For example, in 2005 the European Emissions Trading Scheme started handing out permits to encourage big energy users to regulate emissions. But after two years of operation, critics say the emissions quotas were set too high and energy plants have made billions in windfall profits on the scheme by selling surplus permits, while overall emissions have still risen across Europe.

Similarly, carbon offsetting - the system by which employers or individuals can find carbon-reducing activities to compensate for their own polluting activities - has proved to be highly irregular in its implementation, with reports of "carbon cowboys" offering to plant trees without having the means to do so.

Workplace emissions

While stricter enforcement of these measures is expected to make them more effective over time, there remains an urgent need to hold employers to account. Research indicates that at least half of all carbon emissions are the result of work activities.

In England and Wales the Environment Agency, which enforces over 750 environmental laws, reports that around 1,000 pollution incidents had a serious impact on the environment in 2005. Every year the organisation prosecutes hundreds of firms for environmental crimes, some of them repeat offenders (see table below). For example, a Rotherham-based recycling firm Van Dalen was fined after it ignored several warnings from the Environment Agency about illegally dismantling refrigerators.

Jacqui Savage from the Environment Agency said of the Van Dalen case: "This was a deliberate and calculated action by the company. They purposefully flouted the law for profit, releasing chemicals that damaged the ozone layer. The Environment Agency will not tolerate companies that put profit before the environment."

Highest fines for environmental crimes

The Environment Agency provided the Labour Research Department (LRD) with data on the largest fines from its prosecutions. The following table sets out the 10 highest fines for environment crimes between 2000 and 2006.

Firm	Fine (£)	Year	Sector
Cemex UK Cement	400,000	2006	minerals
Thames Water Utilities	250,000	2000	water
Cleansing Services Group	250,000	2003	waste
Sevalco	240,000	2004	chemicals
Anglia Water Services	190,000	2002	water
Tioxide Europe	150,000	2000	chemicals
Network Rail infrastructure	125,000	2000	rail
Midland Waste Management	108,000	2002	waste
Eurocare Environmental Services	100,000	2003	waste
Van Dalen UK	100,000	2006	waste

Employers' failings were also highlighted in a Labour Research Department (LRD) survey of union reps carried out earlier this year.

The survey found that over three in five employers (61%) have done nothing to promote green transport policies, and more than half have been equally inactive on water conservation (57%) and green purchasing (52%). Union reps also reported that a third of employers have done nothing to minimise waste or minimise resource use (both 35%). Fewer than a quarter (23%) of reps reported that their workplace had an environmental management system.

Although some employers have launched high-profile media initiatives, this has not translated into fundamental changes in the workplace. As a rep at a rail fastenings firm put it, environmental issues are "seen as low priority - no real effort from the company".

By contrast, the LRD survey found that union reps were enthusiastic about tackling environmental issues, including climate change. Reps outlined practical measures they

had negotiated on energy efficiency, transport, waste and recycling (See LRD's Workplace Report magazine, February 2007).

Right to paid time off

At present, many trade union reps use their existing legal rights to take up environmental issues, which they see as integral to their role in promoting better living and working conditions. However, some report that their employers obstruct this work, narrowly interpreting regulations and guidance on trade union activities (see box below).

The TUC argues that environment reps should be able to participate in climate change education, training and employee engagement activities consistent with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

TUC deputy general secretary Frances O'Grady has called for environmental reps to have the right to paid time off so they can carry out their duties and attend trade union training.

"This would give union reps and members a voice at work on energy efficiency, recycling, green travel plans and sourcing renewable energy - and then to use cost savings to create better jobs and greener ways to work," she said.

LRD environment survey

Earlier this year the Labour Research Department carried out a survey on environmental measures being taken in unionised workplaces.

We received 677 responses, with union reps detailing the improvements they had negotiated. However, they also pointed to problems they faced taking up environmental issues at work.

Despite their desire to take action, only 31% of respondents said the union has been involved in environmental improvement measures in their workplace.

And even in workplaces where the employer had an environmental management system only 10% had unions involved.

Around a quarter (26%) of reps reported getting time off for training and duties regarding the environment, and just 10% said they had attended training on environmental issues.

Many union reps highlighted the fact that employers are not engaging with environmental issues. For example, a PCS rep said the Department for Work and Pensions' idea of minimising resources was "to cut staff".

A Prospect rep at EDF Energy made a similar point: "A policy of relocating staff and reducing business mileage is not environmentally friendly as it increases private mileage."

The Trade Union Sustainable Development Advisory Committee (TUSDAC), set up in 1998 as the main forum for consultation between government and trade unions on environmental issues, also argues for a bigger role for unions on environmental issues.

It has called for the scope of trade union duties, as set out in the conciliation service Acas's code of practice on Time off for trade union duties and activities, to be amended to recognise the role of unions in formal consultations with the employer on "sustainable production and consumption".

TUSDAC is also calling for an explicit recognition of wider environmental duties, and for reps to be able to attend accredited environmental training courses.

The TUC proposes that environment reps would get a minimum 10 days of accredited training in the 12 months immediately following their election. Reps would have the right to reasonable paid time off to carry out their functions, and to get information from their employer to assist with these duties. Employers would be required to grant facilities such as room space, phone and computer use so that reps could fulfil these duties.

Tony Juniper, executive director of environmental group Friends of the Earth, has written to TUC general secretary Brendan Barber to express his support for the campaign. "It concerns Friends of the Earth that trade union and environmental representatives have trouble being released to deal with environmental matters or attend training courses," he wrote. "That is why I would like to add Friends of the Earth's voice to your call for the government to give stronger rights for workplace environmental representatives by amendments to the Acas code of practice."

The LRD survey shows that there is a real appetite among union reps to work on environmental issues. And if granted legal rights to time off they could make a real difference to how workplaces manage environmental problems.